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AUTHOR Aviles, Christopher B.
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ABSTRACT

Social work educators are being called upon more often to deliver employee workplace seminars for community agencies on a variety of topics ranging from burnout and stress management to improving workplace communication and managing workplace conflicts. One tool that addresses workplace communication is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). It is a personality inventory widely used in higher education and social work education because it emphasizes the positive aspects of personality instead of pathology. It has been utilized for personal, career, and marriage counseling; conflict and stress management; and team building. Social work educators use it to increase the self-awareness of social work students. The MBTI is a useful tool for social work educators to use in Employee Assistance Program workplace seminars because it offers a way to conceptualize employee preferences and strengths. Seminar participants regularly say the MBTI helped them identify and better understand workplace conflicts. This paper includes specifics about what the MBTI measures and information on access to testing. (JDM)

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Utilizing the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory in Employee Assistance Program Workplace Seminars

AUTHOR

Christopher B. Aviles, Ph.D., ACSW
Assistant Professor of Social Work

Social Work Department
Buffalo State College
1300 Elmwood Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14222

Work 716-878-5327
Home 716-876-7016
avilescb@buffalostate.edu

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ABSTRACT

The Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) is a personality inventory widely used in private industry, higher education, and social work education probably because the MBTI emphasizes positive aspects of personality instead of sickness or pathology (Fairhurst & Fairhurst, 1995; Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997). This paper describes the MBTI and addresses how the MBTI can be utilized in Employee Assistance Programs to deliver workplace seminars regarding employee self-awareness, communication skills, and workplace conflict.

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Introduction

It is not uncommon for Employee Assistance Programs to call on social work educators to deliver employee workplace seminars for community agencies and private industry on a variety of topics ranging from burnout and stress management, to improving workplace communication and managing workplace conflicts. Two topics that are often of interest to employees are "Improving communication skills" and "Understanding workplace conflicts." Conducting these seminars can be difficult because workplace conflicts often involve employee perceptions. For example, an employee may feel a supervisor is caustic and critical while the supervisor may think their feedback is objective and accurate. Course material and classroom exercises from the social work curriculum can be adapted for use in workplace seminars. However, an innovative tool for delivering EAP seminars that address workplace communication is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

The MBTI is a personality inventory widely used in higher education, business, and social work education probably because it emphasizes positive aspects of personality instead of sickness or pathology (Fairhurst & Fairhurst, 1995; Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997). The MBTI has been taken by over 12 million people and translated into at least 30 languages. The MBTI has been utilized for personal, career and marriage counseling, for conflict and stress management, team building and for understanding managerial styles. It has been used in social work education to increase the self-awareness of social work students (Moore, Jenkins, Dietz & Feuerbaum, 1997). Described below are what

the MBTI measures and how social work educators can use it to deliver Employee Assistance Program workplace seminars.

The MBTI is perfect for social work educators who deliver Employee Assistance Program workplace seminars because the MBTI does not measure sickness or pathology and the results are non-judgmental. The MBTI can be quickly scored, the results are easily understood and applied to workplace and life issues. The MBTI measures preferences in four aspects of personality (e.g., Extroversion versus Introversion, Sensing versus iNtuition, Thinking versus Feeling, and Judging versus Perception). The MBTI produces 16 different combinations of four-letter codes (e.g., E or I, S or N, T or F, J or P) that suggest which aspects of personality someone "prefers."

Healthy individuals contain all eight personality aspects but normally prefer one aspect to another. A common analogy is the preference for signing our names with our dominant hand. We can sign with our 'weak' hand but it takes concentration and can feel uncomfortable. Similarly, two employees may successfully complete the same workplace task but one may do so effortlessly while the other expends greater energy if the task involves their least preferred aspect. For example, although they can do both, extroverts may enjoy public speaking more than introverts, and introverts may enjoy doing background research for a presentation more than extroverts. Let's briefly examine the four personality aspects the MBTI measures.

What the MBTI Measures

The first of the four major personality dimensions involves Introversion and Extroversion. The Extroversion and Introversion scale measures someone's source of energy and direction of focus in the world. Extroversion suggests someone may have an outward focus directed to the world of people. Extroverts can be friendly, sociable, and be energized by interacting with others. People preferring introversion may have an inward focus directed to their inner experiences of the outer world. Introverts may be quiet, introspective and perhaps intense or focused. People who prefer introversion may enjoy privacy and be energized by contemplation, introspection or activities involving concentration. Employee Assistance Program workplace seminar participants easily relate the MBTI to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g., having an introvert work a busy reception desk, having an extrovert work alone on a tedious detailed project). Participants also offer examples from their home lives. Many participants have said they now understand why at the end of a hard week an extroverted partner may want to 'hit the town' while the introverted partner may want to relax at home. Seminar participants often say they better understand why employees who prefer extroversion may enjoy working a busy reception desk more easily than employees who prefer introversion, and why employees who prefer introversion may enjoy quietly reading professional journals more than employees who prefer extroversion.

The Sensing and Intuition scale measures ways of perceiving and acquiring information. A sensing preference can mean someone enjoys gathering

facts and information with their five senses. People who prefer sensing may like concrete, practical details and enjoy doing sequential or precise work. A preference for iNtuition can mean someone gathers information by seeing overall patterns and abstractions, and may enjoy finding new solutions and possibilities. Employees who prefer sensing may enjoy making their work function like a well-oiled machine, while employees preferring intuition may enjoy doing things creatively or differently. With this aspect, seminar participants often give examples of information gathering prior to decision making (e.g., the sensing partner gathered all the facts while the intuitive partner just 'knew' what choice to make). Employees who prefer intuition may easily see the overall picture or grand scheme while sensing employees may easily see details. Bear in mind that for balance and healthy functioning, each code needs the strengths of the other. For example, the grand overall picture tells us nothing about project costs, and a cost-benefit analysis won't tell us if a project is consistent with an organization's mission statement and vision.

The Thinking and Feeling scale measures ways of evaluating information and deciding. A thinking preference means someone may make decisions based on facts, evidence and objective analysis. Employees who prefer thinking may focus on fairness and may find flaws and criticize without intending to. A feeling preference can mean considering how decisions will affect others. People who prefer feeling often enjoy harmony in personal and work relationships and may value compassion over objectivity. Employees who prefer thinking may value objectivity and truth over compassion. Seminar participants quickly note that this

aspect involves "head & the heart." Employees who prefer feeling often note that for them, how something is said is as important as what is said. Alternatively, employees who prefer thinking may respond more to the message than it's delivery (e.g., "say what's on your mind and don't pretty it up."). For this code, participants often describe workplace conflicts involving employee feedback. A feeling employee may experience objective feedback as caustic while a thinking supervisor may view objective feedback as simply the "truth."

The Judging and Perception scale measures ways of interacting with our environment. People who prefer judging may like structure, order, specific plans and can be decisive in their work and personal lives. People who prefer perceiving may enjoy being flexible, adaptable, and enjoy working on several open-ended projects as opposed to one. This code often manifests in workflow and time management issues. For example, employees who prefer judging may complete projects ahead of schedule to avoid stress. Employees who prefer perceiving may delay project completion to keep all options open and may enjoy the stress and excitement of making a last minute deadline. Consider the potential workplace conflict when a perceiver constantly gives projects due at the last minute to an employee whom prefers judging (e.g., "stop setting me up for failure!"). Or, when a judging supervisor wants progress reports from a perceiving employee who begins projects when deadlines approach (e.g., "stop micro-managing me!").

Employee Assistance Program workplace seminar participants easily grasp how the MBTI helps for understanding and potentially improving workplace

conflicts. For example, if two employees are equally skilled, a supervisor could consider giving reception duties to the one who prefers extroversion, and meticulous detailed projects to the one who prefers sensing. Although either employee can do the job, one may actually enjoy it more than the other may. The implications for understanding and improving our workplace and home lives are endless. As I kid my seminar participants, when I want feedback for my own personal improvement, I ask my thinking friends when I want the straight truth, and my feeling friends when I want the softened-up truth.

Resources

The MBTI takes about 25 minutes to complete and includes 93 multiple choice type items written at the 7th grade reading level. The MBTI is available from Consulting Psychologists Press (800-624-1765; http://www.mbti.com/). A MBTI preview kit costs about $16.00. There are two scoring options. A completed MBTI can be sent to Consulting Psychologists Press and a profile will be mailed back. The MBTI also can be manually scored. A package of 10 prepaid mail-in scoring Booklet/Answer Sheets costs $69. All materials for manual scoring costs about $200 (answer/report sheets must be replenished). To purchase the MBTI you must have graduate coursework in tests & measurements from a psychology or education department, or have completed MBTI training. MBTI training is offered through Type Resources (800-456-6284; http://www.type-resources.com/); the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (800-777-2278; http://www.capt.org/) and, Otto Kroeger

Associates (703-591-6284; http://www.typetalk.com). MBTI training ranges from a 2-day ($395) to 5-day format ($990) and is conducted around the country.

My Employee Assistance Program workplace seminars must be advertised in advance because I utilize manual scoring. Employees take the MBTI, return it to their Employee Assistance Program work site liaison, who sends it to me. Worker privacy is insured because after scoring, the MBTI profile goes directly from my briefcase to employees at the seminar.

The MBTI is a wonderful tool for social work educators to use in Employee Assistance Program workplace seminars because it offers a way to conceptualize employee preferences as strengths and consider why the workplace needs all eight preferences. Seminar participants regularly say the MBTI helped them identify and better understand workplace conflicts. With time limited workplace seminars, perhaps the best outcome we can hope for is to spark employees to begin considering workplace and life issues that Employee Assistance Programs can help them address. The MBTI can help accomplish this, and perhaps much more.

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